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Women and Patriarchy in Post-colonial Kenya: A Critical Interrogation of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment*

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Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment*, published just over two decades after Kenya's independence, explore the country's post-colonial inclination towards patriarchy. This paper is hinged on the premise that the post-colonial Kenya is replete with patriarchal tendencies, these tendencies permeate all spheres of its political and economic structures, thus leading to gender inequality. Contextualizing patriarchy within the socio-economic and political structure of the post-colonial Kenya, this paper seeks to highlight the challenges to women's participation in Kenya's public sphere as depicted in Macgoye's novels. Informed by feminist theory, the paper seeks to demonstrate the various ways women seek to claim their agency as active participants in the society despite the challenges. The paper concludes that female characters in *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* rise above the limitations brought about by the post-colonial patriarchal constructs.

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, men have had the advantage of full participation in the public realm while women have traditionally been consigned to the private realm of childbearing and homemaking. This is particularly so in post-colonial societies like Kenya where traditional patriarchal structures are still very strong. The pervasive influence of patriarchy poses challenges to women's participation in the public sphere and limits their participation and involvement in the social, political, economic life of their society.

Women writers across the globe write to address the issues affecting their kind in the society. Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye is one such writer. In her novels *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment*, the Kenyan author seems to carry the weight of women's marginalisation. Having been one of the most prolific Kenyan female writers and a pioneer woman writer. Macgoye seeks to challenge this assertion through the protagonists in *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment*. The author achieves this by creating female characters who assertively stand to be the voice of the other women in the society. In these two texts, the author endows women with the will to challenge and even confront some of the patriarchal constructs that stifle their lives. In doing so, the author seeks to redefine and restore the distorted image. This is because in Kenya as in many other countries across the world, women have faced difficulty when it comes to making their voices heard. Eventually, the women characters are seen to be given power, strength, and the will to act, acting to recover, re-inscribe, and re-invigorate the issues affecting them in the evidently suffocating grip of patriarchy. The author deconstructs the Kenyan woman as one who is weighed down by the difficult odds and lifts her above all the limitations to emerge as a strong, assertive, dependable social agent. In doing this, the author shows the various ways women in Kenya rise above patriarchy. Macgoye's female characters are endowed with self-will and stamina. This sees them successfully put in place several strategies that enable them overcome the

limitations and prejudices hurled their way by the pre-existing patriarchal constructs.

WOMEN AND PATRIARCHY IN POST-COLONIAL KENYA

The provision of education is a global and universal necessity that enables everyone acquire or improve their knowledge and skills. Education enables one attain agency, more so for a woman, education enables her make independent choices so that in the long run, she can confront the patriarchal constructs that stifle her life and hamper her progress. Post-colonial Kenya limits women's access to education, this limitation threatens to lock them out of the realms of development and progress. Consider this assertion on the provision of education, "*If we continue to leave vast sections of the people of the world outside the orbit of education, we make the world not only less just, but also less secure*". This assertion points out how vital education is for it is a link to security. An educated woman is a secure woman who can wade through the social and cultural dynamics present in the patriarchal post-colonial society. This is so because education is the foundation for personal transformation. The women characters in *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* strive to break the ceiling and get themselves out of the bracket of women denied the access to education. In Macgoye's *Coming to Birth*, Martin, Paulina's husband is educated, he is employed as a salesman in a small stationery shop. He is duly and proudly transformed; he even advances by taking evening classes in book-keeping. Paulina on the other hand is denied this chance for she is married to him at the age of sixteen, barely gone through adequate basic education. Rachel, her neighbour, on meeting her says she is younger than expected. She brings to our attention the fact that girls have to grapple with the challenge of early marriage, an eye opener to the fact that the expectation of early marriage limits the women to getting to be educated, just as the male counterparts. Macgoye enables us see through Rachel's eyes the stifling grip of patriarchy, denying women education. Arguably, education is advocated as one of the ways for one's development, while Martin has

developed and continues to seek avenues for further development, Paulina is confined to an early marriage.

"They are in a hurry to get you settled these days... and the mother's milk hardly dried on her lips, poor thing" (Macgoye, 1986, p. 10)

Contemporary surveys reveal that girls are more likely to be out of school than boys, for almost two-thirds of the world's illiterate adults are women. According to UNICEF estimates and surveys, around the world, 129 million girls are out of school, including 32 million of primary school age, and 97 million of secondary school age. Just at sixteen, Paulina's naivety and lack of exposure is evident when she first comes to Nairobi. Macgoye presents a Paulina whose lack of education leaves her lacking in exposure, unlike Martin who is composed and swift as they find their way from the train station.

"She wanted to leap away from the kerb each time a car came close and felt being new and strange, she must be the one to give way..." (Macgoye, 1986, p. 3).

Arguably, Paulina's coming to the city, away from the village is the beginning of her awakening and pursuit for education. In chapter one, The naïve rural girl who comes to her husband in the city seeks to grow and seek what the patriarchal constructs denied her through early marriage. Paulina's quest for education begins when she realizes she had been deprived of this basic need, her determination and self-will kick in.

"She was not slow to learn, considering how little time had been allowed her for learning up to now" (Macgoye, 1986, p. 12)

Notably, Paulina does not sit and wait to watch her life slip through her fingers, through determination, she puts her best foot first just a few weeks after coming into the city, her determination to subvert the limitation between her and getting educated. Her quest for education thus begins when Ahoya encouraged her to attend Luo meetings in the little church at St. John and join sewing classes when she could afford the materials. Macgoye puts Ahoya in Paulina's path in the quest for education, a classic example of

women standing with each other to subvert this patriarchal limitation. Paulina is quickly intergraded and assimilated into the urban life,

Not being able to read or write or count or communicate is a tremendous deprivation, this is a universal assertion that Paulina would not wish to be a party to, she thus walks away from and fights this deprivation. She is getting to learn Swahili for she would compare word for word the New Testament Bible that Martin bought her, with the Luo Muma. She starts to learn how to read, though still slow. She keeps practicing speaking Swahili by accompanying her neighbour to the vegetable market and the shops, these daily interactions make her more fluent. Macgoye thus critically interrogates and subverts this pre-existing limitation founded on patriarchy by getting Paulina endowed by this ardent ambition to seek education, against all odds.

Similarly in *The Present Moment*, Priscilla got to go to school at a young age, while Rahel learnt to read while at the army barracks in Gilgil, while the young boys had the privilege of going to the madrasa, Sophia did not go with her brothers. However, she learnt at home to read and count for trading purposes, in addition to learning the art of needlework.

With each passing day, Paulina seeks for more. She is encouraged by the teachers to apply for Homecraft school. Macgoye puts Paulina in different paths to be challenged for various opportunities. On her way back to Nairobi, she had stopped in Kisumu to visit a neighbour who had taken a course in homecraft. She enthused to the teachers about it till they told her she was welcome to apply. Once this quest to gain education was rekindled, Paulina was unstoppable. She is relentless about the idea of joining the Homecraft and

"Kept on and on about homecraft until Martin wrote letters about it and found references for her and helped her a bit with reading and writing" (Macgoye 1986).

And eventually joining the Homecraft. Paulina does, she goes off to Kisumu. She was the

youngest in her class, despite her state of childlessness and little education which made the classmates cold-shoulder her, the European praised her for being eager to improve her home.

One of the most guaranteed ways in subverting patriarchy and its limitations is through the acquisition of education, and by extension, securing a job that would guarantee self-reliance. Macgoye pits Paulina in this light. The objective of taking the Homecraft course was to get a job as a club leader, teach the other women, and make money in the long run. Oludhe thus puts Paulina in an environment where she can nurture other hand-on-skills like embroidery and bakery, enabling her to earn money. Paulina's horizon keeps expanding for life in Kisumu at the Homecraft opened ways to explore more and experience new things, she would occasionally go to see films and cinemas. In both *The Present Moment* and *Birth and Coming to Birth*, Macgoye presents female characters who use education as a weapon against the social and cultural dynamics, brought about by the patriarchal constructs. At the Homecraft, Paulina excels, for her course results were good. This saw her appointed club leader at the centre nearest her husband's home. With this appointment, she would get a fabulous earning. Her education self-saved her from the shifting life in Kariokor for she never went back there.

Macgoye creates female characters who, even though being educated was largely left for men, go out of their ways to seek education. In addition to being a club leader, Paulina also attends a singer sewing class in Kisumu. In *The Present Moment*, the old ladies are attended to by a group of young community nurses in training. These nurses, all being females, had sought to be educated and after their first training, they would go on to midwifery at Pumwani. Mary, one of the nurses, was even looking forward to joining the public health. From Paulina in *Coming to Birth* and Rahel and Sophy in *The Present Moment*, Macgoye presents women who take it upon themselves to seek education, for it was not handed to them. They rise above this gender inequality to fight for themselves to get educated. Having some sort of education guarantees they

can go ahead to be self-reliant, even if they can earn just a little from their careers and skills, which are the fruits they reap from their determination and resilience.

The New Woman in Patriarchy: Employed, Independent, Self-Reliant, and Dependable

Gender differences in the various societal aspects persist, despite the advances made to bridge the gap brought about by gender inequality. These advances are geared towards broadening women's horizon regarding opportunities and involvement in the public domain, which would not be possible with the deeply rooted tendencies of gender inequality, which would confine and limit women's active involvement. While men generally participate in the public realm through education, business and politics, women on the other hand have their roles consigned to childbearing and domestic chores. Men are otherwise seen as primary policy makers and implementors; in this disparity, women are seen to be in the periphery. This assertion is however contested by Macgoye, who, in *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* presents characters who, even though they perform their duties of childbearing and being homemakers, additionally seek to find employment. Having attained economic empowerment, these women ultimately achieve independence, self-reliance and dependability, the patriarchal limitations deeply rooted in the post-colonial Kenya, notwithstanding. They thus eventually accord themselves a new image, an image of the new woman who ardently seeks employment, this results into the woman participating in earnings, participation in politics and exercising their civic rights, in addition to being independent, self-reliant, and dependable, as fruits of having been educated and employed.

In *Coming to Birth*, Martin is employed at Shah and Sons printers as a sales person where he earns one hundred and forty shillings a month which enables him to pay rent and attend evening classes in English and book keeping, on the other hand, Paulina – his wife – has to solely rely on him for the day to day running of the house, this does not however remain this way for Paulina's ardent

quest for self-reliance and dependability kicks in, before this, Martin gave her housekeeping money every two or three days telling her what to buy, but she was learning from the older women what to buy.

Macgoye, through the two texts this paper is limited to, aptly presents the belief that what cannot be cured must be endured. The female characters in both *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* labour and strive to break free and make something out of themselves while the men have some sort of job or employment, the women must go out of their ways; Susana had a market stall, Paulina with admiration at Susana's initiative tells Martin:

"Maybe I could learn to sell vegetables in the market like Susana" (Macgoye, 1986, p. 26).

Martin is, however very skeptical about this.

"You-market-that's not a good one. You'd get yourself marched off to police again or to mission again or bloody holy brothers and sisters again before you learn to get 10 cents for a twenty-five-cent bunch of carrots" (Macgoye, 1986, p. 26)

Paulina demurely resigns to this only to decide to grow her vegetables, for she found a patch behind the racecourse where she could raise a few vegetables. They helped on lean days. (Macgoye, 1986, p. 28) the fact that Paulina cannot be let out of Martin's eye range does not dampen her spirit, but rather, she compromises and decides to grow her vegetables. Additionally, she learnt where she could meet people from home who might be bringing a bag of maize or flour. This way, she could, in her way, give Martin a hand at running the house.

With each passing day, Paulina is presented by Marjorie Oludhe to be making remarkable steps to increase her value and dependability. She had learned to crochet when she was in Gem. She, therefore, persuaded Martin to buy her thread and hook. She made lacy covers that were sufficiently admired by other people. She would get requests to make these covers for some of the people who called in on them.

"So that she was able to produce thirty or forty shillings each month by making clothes to order. This weighed in Martin's decision to keep her in Nairobi and not send her home" (Macgoye, 1986)

Arguably, once a woman has You make herself dependable and self-reliant through economic empowerment, she stands a better chance of commanding respect, especially in the family setup. The fact that Paulina is dependable makes Martin keep her with him so Paulina would crochet industriously, even on a train. In Paulina, the clear picture of a woman who is reliable and dependable is painted. Paulina ends up creating a new space for herself. She has made herself reliable, dependable, and useful. She understandingly returns from her six-month stay at home with food, so much foodstuff that she had to give a man two shillings fifty to carry the sacks on a handcart. The fact that she can help Martin cut down costs elevates their living standards for her crochet work and prospers to the point of asking Martin whether they could move into a brick house. And moving, they did, but the house was smaller than they expected, that notwithstanding she could sit outside crocheting and contriving a profit from her crochet despite the dust and smell from around her.

Macgoye presents a Paulina with this great desire to keep growing and remain useful. Thus, Paulina falls in love with the idea of taking a course in Homecraft,

"How she would love to go there and keep her home clean and provided" (Macgoye, 1986, p. 37)

While at the Homecraft, Paulina meets Joanna, who came in pursuit of education as well, so she could get work to help her along against the day her husband would decide to waste no more school fees on daughters. To her, education will be a guarantee that her daughters will be able to sufficiently depend on her. Janet, who is a saved Christian and a widow, is also at the Homecraft to be able to fend for herself and her son, who was a student at Maseno High School. Her refusal to be inherited as dictated by the Luo culture sees her

seeking ways to gain independence and self-reliance to sufficiently take care of her son, for second husbands rarely contributed to school expenses.

The skills Paulina gained at the Homecraft enabled her to make her house neat and comfortable, with a new bed, mattress, a food cupboard, and some upright chairs. All these she did out of the income from the club. Paulina is even able to help and support her mother-in-law. She arguably made herself worthy and became an important person at home.

“She made the house itself more fitting to her expectation than most of his friends’ wives”.
(Macgoye, 1986, p. 51)

Macgoye gradually enables Paulina to grow, making steps, having gained the necessary education, towards being dependable. Consequently, her life improved, for she could now take regular trips for shopping. She continued with crocheting and sewing for other families. Additionally, settling away from Martin enables her to make more of herself.

“And yet she had become free, in the sense of Martin, and she had changed, she provided for herself, lived by herself... she made decisions for herself of course, what to buy, what train to travel on...” (Macgoye, 1986, p. 46)

Paulina’s education is a guaranteed ticket to self-reliance and independence. As the years go by, Paulina becomes more sure of herself,

“She was a little fatter and took and took more care of her hair and skin (Macgoye, 1986, p. 50)

This new development is a juxtaposition to the image Oludhe presents when she makes her debut,

“She looked thinner than he remembered... and pale with deep shadows under her eyes. She was wearing a faded blue cotton dress and a white headscarf. Her rubber shoes were scuffed and brown” (Birth-2)

With education as a strategy against patriarchal constructs, the female protagonists can overcome and rise above the social and cultural dynamics

that would otherwise limit their progress. Paulina, as young as she was twenty-four years of age, moved to live alone in an official clubhouse. At Homecraft, she had the job of gathering women and issuing programs to them in addition to buying supplies and collecting school fees. She readily welcomed this new development, a new phase in her life.

With her regular salary and constant income from sewing and crocheting, for now, she had advanced and had her sewing machine, she made her home descent and more pleasant. This new economic sense made her dependable. This was so because her relations now came from home expecting bus fares and blankets as they would from a big person, for indeed, she had made steps financially. Her mother was proud of her position and glad they could depend on her, for she could sew for them clothes and send some money.

In the wake of women getting educated and employed, gender roles and expectations have changed drastically. Barker and Ricardo (2005:10) observe that with urbanization, the expansion of formal education and the increased enrolment of girls in public education have led to changes in gender roles away from the rigid pre-established gender roles. When Paulina’s father dies, she supports him in a huge way by buying foodstuff for the funeral; so much valuable was her presence that her mother felt the pinch when she was to leave to go back to her work, having stayed home for four days. Her mother was still worried about the large number of people that were still there to be fed, for Paulina had attended to their needs so well. To this, Paulina replies,

“I know Mother, but you must see me as a man who has to go back to work. I have no one else to support me” (Macgoye, 1986, p. 66)

Macgoye asserts that it is not only men who can duly provide for and take care of children. Having sufficiently sought self-reliance, a woman can equally fend for the family. When Paulina gets pregnant for Simon, she frees him of any parental obligation. This is so because she got what she

wanted and could take care of the child just all right.

“A child of mine does not have to look for a father who will not stand up for him” (Macgoye, 1986, p. 69).

Looking around her after the delivery of her son Martin Okeyo, she felt happy and satisfied, for there was nothing she lacked. The birth of this baby brings her so much joy and satisfaction that her life is full to the extent that she cannot tolerate proposals from men. She would shrug them away, giving them a chilly command to be off.

Macgoye succeeds in creating a protagonist whose pursuit of self-reliance and independence becomes a great success. Paulina is self-sufficient given her job and income. Additionally with her own sewing machine, she took to dressmaking and made decent and smart dresses for herself. Even Margaret, the young girl who was watching the baby for her, was decently clothed. She also made clothing for her little sister and brothers' children at home. Paulina is confident she can take care of the baby for

“At least Paulina had never had the illusion that anyone was going to help her maintain Okeyo (Oludhe, 1986, p. 73)

The protagonists in both *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* constantly seek employment so that they can have financial independence and autonomy. To break the monotony of Kano, Paulina decides to take a house-keeping job with a family in Nairobi. When the Okelos get a transfer to Mombasa, she gets to work for yet another family, that of Mr and Mrs M; she feels safer remaining in Nairobi than going home where people would only scorn her childless state and a broken marriage. Seeking employment is a big reprieve from the demanding social and cultural demands and expectations of society. While Martin remained resigned, fired, and disillusioned, Paulina on the other hand

“...was the one demanding to grow, to get out, do things” (Macgoye, 1986, p. 112)

“To her, having a job meant also being able to meet and interact with descent people”. (Macgoye, 1986, p. 124)

In both *The Present Moment* and *Coming to Birth*, women going away from home to work meant freedom from the demands of culture. In the present moment, Priscilla goes away from home to work, which keeps her at a distance from other people. For Wairimu, going away from home was a wonderful choice to make, for during her time, girls had only two choices: picking coffee or looking after men. Wairimu chooses the former. She, therefore, flees from home, running away from an arranged marriage. Going to the coffee was a wonderful choice to make because,

“It was one way of choosing for yourself, otherwise for girls there was almost no choice. Boys might choose schools but for girls there were very few school places and as yet little choice: when you came home again there was still marriage to be arranged” (Macgoye, 1987, p. 17)

Having chosen to work at the coffee plantation, Wairimu got financial empowerment because at the end of the month, she got to earn, *“and so you were like a man and could do a lot of choosing for yourself”*. Wairimu had chosen, and so she was destined to go on choosing. She believes firmly in the fact that anyone who wants advancement must look for something better. The pursuit of something better meant safety from forced and arranged marriage, which would only deny her the opportunity to attain self-reliance.

“I was safe from the danger of yesterday (Macgoye, 1987, p. 54)

Being able to seek work away from home is an eye-opener and a surety that better awaits ahead. Being away from home lets Wairimu see the world in its bright colours, not the dead black pictures. The black and dead pictures would be confined to an early and arranged marriage, which would deny her the privilege of experiencing the array of colours the world has to offer. Wairimu, hence, prefers to be freer and explore the world around her. She has this ardent ambition to get to learn Swahili so as to enable her to enter a wider

world than the Kikuyu world. Her mastery of Swahili would see her better placed to understand Nairobi better.

In so many ways, the seven women in *The Present Moment* strive to find some work to do to earn money and make their lives better. They take jobs ranging from housekeeping, sewing, and trade, among others, to ensure financial independence. Wairimu earns six shillings for a thirty-day ticket. She takes pride in the knowledge she has gathered so far and is impressed that her horizon is growing and expanding. Even though Sophia worked hard enough after building herself a traditional house, she saved until she could buy a second sewing machine, and then a third one followed afterwards.

Thus far, Macgoye ensures that the female protagonists grow and progress financially so much that they can be self-reliant, independent, and dependable. In the long run, the fact that women can get their hands on some sort of work or job enables them to actively overcome the demands of the societal social and cultural dynamics. Seeking employment is ultimately a strategy for overcoming the demanding socio-cultural dynamics in post-colonial Kenya.

Additionally, the women employ various ways and strategies to ensure that they assert themselves despite the patriarchal limitations, among them being assertive and making a laudable decision to speak out against patriarchy. Over time, women have lived and grappled with *'the suffocating grip of masculinity nationalism'*, which undoubtedly limits their full participation and involvement in societal matters. They have thus faced difficulty when it comes to making their voices heard. Women, therefore, have in recent years risen above this prejudice to speak and be heard, given the patriarchal demands that they are required to comply with. They have needed to be assertive and speak up against any patriarchal aspects and dynamics that do not go well with them. These dynamics range from domestic violence, wife inheritance, and forced marriage, among other oppressive cultural

dynamics existing in patriarchal post-colonial Kenya.

Paulina in *Coming to Birth* is abused physically and severally by Martin. Over and over again, Paulina endures blow after blow from Martin. In the previous years in the custom, it was customary for the husband to beat the wife.

"Don't you know that if you had been married in the old way your husband would have given you a token of beating while the guests were still there? They say that is so that when you are widowed and inherited you will not be able to say that your new husband was the first person ever to beat you" (Macgoye, 1986, p. 24)

Paulina is subjected to a series of episodes of domestic violence as a result of her very first unfortunate encounter of losing her way from the hospital.

"His fist was pummelling into the small of her back and he began pulling the bed as though to overturn it on top of her. He kicked her buttocks..." (Macgoye, 1986, p. 22)

She was discoloured with bruises now and dragged herself to life, face downwards on the bed to protect her face and belly from the vein of blows. These series of beatings happened after she was discharged from the hospital, having suffered a miscarriage. The beatings left her dazed, wondering what would happen to her next.

"... or would she die of his beatings here where there was no tribunal to appeal to" (Macgoye, 1986, p. 23)

Years later, Martin beats her for being unfaithful. He rained blows on her methodically, unlike the first time he beat her in Pumwani, which was experimental. Paulina's assertiveness kicks in this time round. She does not keep quiet to endure it all silently. She speaks out, deciding to appeal to the headman to testify to her industry and modest behaviour at home.

Macgoye enables Paulina to grow in such a way that, with the passing years, she knows what she wants. She takes the bold step of going to speak to the Europeans at Homecraft about it. She detailed

to the Europeans how she had tried to bear an unsatisfactory marriage for eight years. She decisively says she could not bear it anymore. She seeks a transfer from the Homecraft near Martin's home to Kisumu, "*where she could live in a municipal house, and her educated opinion would defend her*".

In *The Present Moment*, Macha Chungu, faced with pain and suffering at each stage in her life, chooses to adjust and cope, making herself into a different person just to fit every situation. "*Just as she had done on marriage, motherhood and widowhood*" (Macgoye, 1987, p. 5.) Women have the need to adapt to every stage of their life while remaining conscious at each stage of identity.

Wairimu has to remain assertive at the coffee plantation so that she can uphold her morality. Being a strong girl, she "*held her own against the men's demands... None of them could put a spell on her, and she always said no.*" No man was, therefore, able to make her sway away from the path she had chosen to tread. Being at the coffee plantation had enabled her to escape arranged marriage, but it had not brought her what she wanted. She wanted more; this made her decide to go to Nairobi, and she had been saving up for this big journey. Wairimu wa Gichuru introduces herself to Harry Thuku, who commends her bravery for she had undertaken a hard thing, this big step of coming to Nairobi. Thuku pulls a string, and Wairimu gets a job at an eatery, courtesy of her assertiveness.

In *The Present Moment and Coming to Birth*, women had to be tough and assertive, just as Nekea says in *Moment*, "because she had learned from childhood to look for others rather than to be looked after". Bringing out the fact that women ought to be both assertive and tough.

In addition to being assertive and making the choice to speak out, women have chosen to stand in solidarity with one another amid the limitations brought about by gender inequality. Generally, the social and political structures of a community tend to be in such a way that men possess structural power where they get to monopolize high-status

positions in important social, economic, legal, and religious institutions. Given this fact, the existing social and cultural dynamics in society must be overcome by the females to rise above the male hegemony. Such a monopoly is seen in the rampant cases of domestic violence against women. Marjorie Oludhe, in both *The Present Moment* and *Coming to Birth*, thus creates female characters who work in constant solidarity with one another to fight and overcome patriarchy.

In the face of domestic violence, Ahoya and other women stand with Paulina in solidarity. Ahoya comes to comfort Paulina after Martin beats her and locks her in the house. She brings her food and medicine. She reminds Paulina, "*Every wife who comes to Nairobi from the country has problems. Do not think it is the end of the world*" (Mcgoye, 1986, p. 24). When she left, Paulina at once felt comforted. About the medicine she gives Paulina, guessing that Martin would give her trouble because of it, she says, "*Now if he smells the ointment tell him I brought it and he can come and ask me any questions he likes*" (Macgoye, 1986, p. 25) Ahoya comforts Paulina and gives her medicine following the beatings she got from Martin, giving her comfort and consolation.

Another woman who stands in solidarity with Paulina following the violence she experiences from Martin is Amina. Having come to collect the utensils Ahoya brought, Amina gathers her friends around to decry what Martin did to Paulina despite her very young age. "But my goodness, did he go for her. And her mother's milk hardly dried on her lips, poor thing". In solidarity, she says, "*We'll see that she learns to give him something to think about, won't we just*" (Macgoye, 1986, p. 26). Amina and her friends join hands to stop Martin from beating Paulina yet again; this is when Martin returns from work, ready to beat her for lying in bed till so late with no food ready for him. "*Amina and her friends started making a lot of noise in the front room, and he let his hand fall*" (Macgoye, 1986, p. 25).

The women stand united and in solidarity with their own when Paulina is faced with the challenge of domestic violence. Additionally,

even in the face of a lack of resources, Rachel, Paulina's neighbour, stands in solidarity with her. She readily lends her charcoal that night when Paulina makes her first domestic decision as a city woman. Similarly, the women are there to encourage one another to become better versions of themselves. Paulina, having been married at the age of sixteen, did not get an opportunity to go to school. While in Nairobi, Ahoya encourages her to attend Luo meetings in the little church of St. John, and if she could afford the sample materials, she could join sewing classes. Sussan, on her part, introduces Paulina to several of the brethren women. These women spoke beautiful Swahili and managed their housekeeping well, a thing that Paulina observed intently. The women kept encouraging her.

The common notion that women are their enemies is not so in *Coming to Birth*. While other women stand against Paulina's advancement at Homecraft, her mother-in-law backs her up when the others rise against her appointment as a club leader. For the others said,

"To appoint a slip of a girl, who was not side tracked by old-fashioned ways and was still full of enthusiasm. A childless woman? A young woman away from her husband? A person without influential relations?" (Macgoye, 1986, p. 57)

Paulina's mother-in-law stands in solidarity with her, for she liked and appreciated her contribution to the home.

Domestic violence still faces Paulina even years later after her first encounter. The Christmas that Martin came home, having heard of her infidelity and involvement with Simon, he rained blows on her.

"Sussana heard about it and brought some of the brethren to plead with him that his behaviour had put Paulina into temptation and that he should bring her to Nairobi" (Macgoye, 1986, p. 56)

Sussana stands in solidarity with Paulina, pleading with Martin to forgive and forget all about it, for he somehow contributed to Paulina's behaviour.

Paulina's mother remains in solidarity and support of her daughter. She is overjoyed when Paulina delivers Martin Okeyo, especially happy that the baby is named Okeyo after her deceased husband. She did not bother Paulina with questions about her plight with Martin but asked no more as she was afraid of her daughter. When she comes to Paulina's house, she is greatly awed by the neat house and the sewing machine. She was very happy for her daughter, overjoyed that a floodgate had been opened granting Paulina the blessing of a child. The women at the home craft were additionally happy for her and respected her more when she returned a month later to her classes and club demonstrations. Oludhe culminates the notion of sharing and solidarity in women. She enables women to be there for each other, for they had been brought up differently and lived different and varied lives; sharing was ultimately an important element in their lives, for it ensured unity.

"They were all masked here for the sake of sharing since they had been brought up to see sharing as the ultimate goal and there remained this sisterhood of constraint to share with" (Macgoye, 1986, p. 56).

Given the nature of polygamous arrangements in *The Present Moment*, Rahel decides to work hand in hand with her co-wife. At their husband's death, Rahel had refused to be inherited by some old man, so they had to stand in solidarity with each other to be able to provide for their children. The co-wife was to prepare fish; her eldest son, Omondi, was a fisherman from Uyoma, while Rahel would collect them off the bus in Kisumu and sell them. With that, they were able to fend for themselves and their children. Rahel's firstborn daughter- Florence, having gotten a job as a ward-maid in the hospital, was able to help her pay up her rent. This step in working together enabled them to live comfortably despite being widowed. Over and over again, the women in *Moment* constantly offer a hand to one another to ensure their prosperity and advancement. Sophia gives her third sewing machine to the daughter of her uncle. This young girl had a baby out of wedlock and needed someone to stand by her.

Sophia took her in; she did so because she remembered that her aunt taught her needlework. Now, she makes elaborate bridesmaids dresses to take care of her family. The skills her aunt enables her to learn make Sophia able to fend for herself and her family and, in turn, able to help the young girl out. As thus discussed, women in both *Moment and Birth* put in strategies ranging from being educated, being employed, being assertive and standing in solidarity. These strategies enable the women to sail through social and cultural dynamics that threaten their growth and development in the course of their lives.

Struggle for Socio-economic and Political Inclusion

In every society, active women's participation and leadership in the political sphere have contributed to sustainable development over the years. This sustainable development does not, however come easy, for the women must struggle and fight for socio-economic and political inclusion. This paper interrogates the active involvement and participation of women in politics, a field that has historically been dominated by males. The United Nations Women records indicate that women carry 22.8% of cabinet membership and leadership. This leaves 78% for the men, showing an undisputable parity between the two genders, with the men taking the lion's share of political inclusion and involvement. Oludhe's *The Present Moment and Coming to Birth*, both texts published a few years after Kenya gained independence, similarly present a situation in which very few women are politically conscious, necessitating a struggle for socio-economic and political inclusion. The female protagonists are presented by Macgoye as being actively involved in political affairs through their active involvement and making several initiations to show their interest in matters of politics. Feminism movements, like the suffragette movements of the 1890's duly sought to campaign for women's right to vote (Shukla, 2006) in addition to the right to own property (Goodwin & Jasper, 2014). (Shukla 2006) further opines that the 2nd wave of feminism fought for women's

right to work and have or not to have children, sexual health and orientation.

Macgoye In *Coming to Birth*, she remarks, "*After all this time, the future was for everyone*" (Macgoye, 1986, p. 82). This is an affirmation that the future in the socio-economic-political domain is open for everyone, both men and women. Given the country's political environment, there was a need for individual political involvement; political leaders, mostly men like Tom Mboya, Argwings K'odhek, Pio Gama Pinto, among others, constantly fought for the rights of the people. This was not a common field for the women, save for some like Chelagat Mutahi, a sitting female MP whom Oludhe calls a rare bird. Chelagat Mutahi is arrested and detained, having been accused of inciting a crowd to violence. Earlier on, she had been asking questions about the detention of Mr. Soroney, the deputy speaker and Mr. Shikuku.

Macgoye carries the weight of getting the women's voices heard on her shoulders. In the text, she is the only female Member of Parliament among all the male parliamentarians. She does not fit in among the men; rather, she stands out by championing for and speaking against the detention of Mr. Soroney. When she is detained because of this, her own kind- women- fight for her release. The detention of Chelagat Mutahi sees the political involvement and awakening in other women in a bid to fight to get her released. Paulina, while working for the family of Mr M, a sitting MP, puts a spiritual fight regarding her detention to fight for her release. Mrs. M asks Paulina if they can get a cross-section of Kenyan women to petition for Chelagat Mutahi's release. Her detention troubled both of them. This is even though they knew that Chelagat was strong and would get through the thirty months she was sentenced to in detention.

Paulina boldly speaks her mind to Martin about this issue: "*We must do something... Write to our MPs to make processions, sign petitions, strike...*" (Macgoye, 1986, p. 111) Paulina has a strong conviction that something needs to be done about the detention. The Paulina and Mrs M duo rack their brains on the various options available that

they can undertake to free Chelagat Mutahi. They were aware that.

“Women’s petition might secure not a pardon for Chelagat, a matter of law, but some mitigation of her sentence. Even if it failed, women might become politically conscious by making the attempt” (Macgoye, 1986, p. 112)

Women’s pursuit of political inclusion and being politically conscious remains the silver lining in post-colonial Kenya. Women strive to find their niche in politics despite the limitations created by gender parity. Politics is a field that has always been male-dominated, and with just a handful of women actively participating, Marjorie Oludhe puts these two women to be politically involved such that should their main objective of getting Chelagat freed fail, they can achieve yet another objective making women politically conscious.

“Tirelessly Mrs. M sought out the leading women in different professions, tribes, communities to assist her” (Macgoye, 1986, p. 111). The need to fight and join the sphere of a socio-economic-political domain through igniting political conscience needs a concerted effort for and from all women, of different professions, tribes and even communities. Mrs. M is convinced that they need the other women to join hands for them to succeed in this, especially the few women in leadership who have the capacity to rally the ordinary folks and have them join in the spirited fight and struggle for inclusion.

“I do not see how we can do anything without the help of leading women who will stand up to the chiefs and convince the ordinary folks” (Macgoye, 1986, p. 113)

Women’s active involvement in political matters is embodied in Paulina. She is stressed out, and on edge the day Chelagat’s judgement is pronounced. She insists to Martin that they must do something about it, like write to their members of parliament or sign petitions, she thinks they can even strike or just do anything to get Chelagat out. She assertively tells Martin, *“But we are the government... we put them there and we help them out”* (Macgoye, 1986, p. 111).

The fact that women are politically conscious and assertive, to the point of actually believing that they are the government, is laudable. This is a welcome assertion, a trigger to ensure inclusivity and dispels any notions of gender parity that point to the direction of men being more involved in socio-economic-political affairs. The women have to claim their place at this table, too. Similarly, Mrs. M remains assertive and focused on Chelagat’s case. She boldly approaches her husband on the matter of petitioning for Chelagat. Mr. M was, however furious about it and reminded her about the fact that the constitution was not made for individuals. He thus advised her to involve herself in other matters, such as collecting funds for a self-help secondary school. The three women in Birth, Chelagat Mutahi, Mrs. M, and Paulina, are seen to be actively involved in matters of politics and are hopeful that all the other women would get to be politically conscious, too, so as to ensure active women’s participation in politics.

In The Present Moment, Wairimu’s political involvement and consciousness stand out. She flees from home so as to escape a forced and arranged marriage. Taking this step gives her the excellent opportunity to choose the course that her life takes, for going to the coffee plantation assured her of keeping a job, which in turn meant having money and freedom. She tears herself away from the coffee plantation to go to Nairobi, where her political awakening is realized for

“She had been right to follow her rainbow” (Macgoye, 1987, p. 54)

Involvement in politics ranges from direct interaction with political leaders to actively participating in political meetings and rallies. All these, Wairimu does. Her first interesting encounter with a politician was with Harry Thuku, whom she had earlier sang songs in praise of back home in Nyeri. Thuku actively protested against women’s road work, forced labour and European taxes. At seventeen years of age, Wairimu springs into action, for she acknowledges the fact that she is part of a new world.

“She felt an urgent need to participate, to make herself also known” (Macgoye, 1987, p. 23)

Wairimu puts herself on an agreeable path. She bravely sings one of the praise songs, a brave act that sees the start of a conversation between her and Harry Thuku. Thuku commends her bravery and helps her find a job in a small tea room.

The country’s political atmosphere was tense at the time, and the locals were up in arms on many occasions, protesting against the exploitation by the Europeans through forced labour, so the masses would hold several meetings in an attempt to fight for their freedom. Wairimu actively attends these political rallies and riots. Her attendance gives her facts about what is going on and also keeps her informed about the future political meetings planned.

“I was there at the Harry Thuku riots. We heard that there was a big meeting and that everyone was going, so of course I had to join too” (Macgoye, 1987, p. 45)

The novel is set at a time of national political upheavals. The 1950s saw people restless because of the rise in taxes and failure to get compensation for their men who had died in the great war. A few leaders, like Harry Thuku, came to the fore leading the people into riots to protest all these social injustices.

Harry Thuku is arrested alongside other people, so the public hold rallies in protest. Wairimu and all the others thought that they could get him out this way. Mostly men were involved in the riots, and only very few women like Wairimu went along with them. The few women present at this riot to ask for Harry Thuku to be freed bravely urged the men to soldier on with the fight and pursuit of Thuku’s freedom, for to them Thuku was a great hero who constantly fought for their rights.

Wairimu’s great and new knowledge in matters of politics keeps broadening, her political consciousness is awakened, and her horizon is growing. Wairimu attended the Jomo Kenyatta address when he returned from England in 1946. Together with Kenyatta were Mbiyu Koinange

and James Beauttah. He had come to address the people at Rusinga stadium, and Wairimu felt she *“had a right to be present at any political event”* (Macgoye 1987:97). Wairimu fell under the political spell, and she remained devoted to Kenyatta.

Over the years, in several parts of the country, several political meetings have been held. Just like Wairimu, Sophia remained politically conscious. She attended and addressed women’s meetings. From 1945 to mid-June 1947, general strikes happened in Mombasa, after the one of 1939, which was the most violent, the people decrying poor living conditions and standards given the low wages. Sophia supported these strikes, for they were in the pursuit of social justice. The people remained spiritually fighting against the social injustices they were subjected to, and Sophia remained a part of them. The year 1957 marked the year of freedom and equality.

Macgoye, through Wairimu, brings out the fact that women can as well be actively involved in the fight against social injustices. Wairimu joined in the 1947 Kisumu strike, for she did not like missing out on these political experiences.

“I did not amount much... I won’t because I hated to miss anything now” (Macgoye, 1987, p. 107)

In 1949, Wairimu became a full member of the Chama and a recruiter. A year later, in 1950 when the country was having the Golden Jubilee, she thought she would go again. More women were drawn into the political circle, and the African Advisory Council introduced to the Duke of Gloucester included two women, a development that made Wairimu feel good at the inclusion of women on such political fronts. More and more women are getting involved in Trade Unions.

Throughout the years, Wairimu grows to become more concerned with dates and months of important meetings what Trade Unions are to make, and what resolutions following meetings held. She attended the big meeting in Kaloleni Hall that would see Africans and Asians together to discuss labour problems and freedom. Wairimu

remains aware of the myriads of demands made during the meeting of 1950, among them the release of Makhan Singh, Fred Kabui and Kibachia, minimum monthly wage of a hundred shillings and most importantly, the freedom of all workers and for all Africans in East Africa for, “*freedom, whatever it meant, was not an impossible thing to ask for*”. (Macgoye 1987: 110) Following this big meeting, there followed a major strike that took eight days. Wairimu actively followed what happened in Shauri Moyo as the strike spread to the Bata factory in Limuru and other places. When she returned to the coffee plantation in Nyeri, she proudly recounted all she had seen.

Macgoye is one the few women in both *The Present Moment and Coming to Birth*, so through their active involvement in the political arena, so much political consciousness for the woman folk is achieved. Through the minority, the few women are dedicated to playing their roles in the political sphere, a sphere that was served generously to the menfolk, given the patriarchal nature of the post-colonial Kenya.

The ardent pursuit of socio-economic-political inclusion additionally calls for self-autonomy, which provides that every individual, as an agent, has the right to make up their mind, make decisions and remain assertive. Self-autonomy is to see the women assertive standing firmly, and fighting for what they believe in. Thus, one can challenge or comply with the given political structures. In *The Present Moment and Coming to Birth*, Marjorie Oludhe articulately presents self-autonomy as an interplay with political involvement. It becomes an interplay among aspects such as personal growth and ambition, assertiveness and social responsibility with of political involvement and awareness.

Paulina in *Coming to Birth* is dedicated to the pursuit of freedom for Chelagat Mutahi, who was detained. She was not ready to hear that it was nearly impossible to have Chelagat released. Paulina takes a stance and assertively stands by it.

“Paulina for the first time set up her will against Martin’s... for the first time she felt

the same pressure to defend her opinion that Mrs. M and other educated women felt. It was no longer obvious that decisions had been made for her” (Macgoye, 1986, p. 114)

Paulina’s self-autonomy is witnessed when she assertively stands by what she believes in. Contrary to Martin’s outlook in life, Paulina was more assertive and focused on getting things done.

“...but always she was the one demanding to grow, to get out, to do things, and he was tired and disillusioned” (Macgoye, 1986, p. 112).

In Paulina, the desire to keep advancing lives on, for there was no way to go except up. Oludhe points out that solidarity among women will see them actively involved in both political and social spheres. Mr. M took Paulina to meetings where women’s place in society was discussed. She used Paulina to point out that a woman can succeed as well in other matters, given that Paulina was still childless. She used Paulina’s failure to get a child to point out that though childless, she was useful and instrumental in other domains, for Paulina had achieved a balanced and contented life without the blessing of children.

Macgoye recounts Paulina’s growth and advancement, for they saw her getting to participate and get involved in ways she could never have done. Mr M’s remarkable comments on Paulina’s development to Mrs M

“It looks as though you’ve got yourself a new woman” (Macgoye, 1986, p. 140)

This came after Paulina’s encounter with the three street urchins, getting this interaction featured in the newspaper. This development makes Mrs. M say that Paulina ought to have used the opportunity to give the public a lecture on ways of keeping families together. This is seen as an active and deliberate step of involvement towards restoring the dignity of street families, for it would be an eye-opener that helps the readers to see those children as people.

CONCLUSION

Macgoye, through *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment*, has elaborately and adequately interrogated and explored the challenge of women

and patriarchy in post-colonial Kenya. Through feminism theory, it is brought out the numerous limitations women suffer because of patriarchal inclinations that yield to gender disparity and inequality. Given the societal social and cultural dynamics existent in the post-colonial Kenya, the women in the texts are seen to be limited in such a way that their growth and potential are curtailed. By the end of the day, the silver lining is that the female characters are endowed with assertiveness and self-will such that they adequately rise above the patriarchal constructs. The women seek education and employment such that they stand out as assertive, self-reliant, self-sufficient, dependable and with self-autonomy. These qualities enable the women to recover and reinvent themselves through education, employment, self-reliance and an ardent fight for inclusion in the socio-economic-political domain. The interrogation of women and patriarchy in post-colonial Kenya is thus successful in this way, by Macgoye creating characters in such a way that they get to subvert the patriarchal constructs and eventually redefine their image in such a way that it is only through the women's initiative can they adequately subvert the patriarchal constructs that stifle and subjugate them.

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